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## **The Dutch Lifelong Learning scene**

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# THE DUTCH LIFELONG LEARNING SCENE: CONTINUING UNRESOLVED ISSUES AND TWO ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES<sup>1</sup>

THEO VAN DELLEN

## Abstract

*This article presents a debate on lifelong learning (LLL) in the Netherlands. The article shows the state of the art of Dutch LLL education, training, and development. In particular, the unfulfilled expectations for the field are shown in a polemic manner by discussing the factors on the micro, intermediate, and macro levels that influence the behavior of the educational systems. This leads to listing the typical Dutch state of the art issues concerning LLL. To handle these issues, the article concludes with two perspectives that may be helpful in the near and distant future.*

## Keywords

*lifelong learning, adult learning professionalism, open society model, learner subjectivity*

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is inspired by Theo van Dellen's and Ruud van der Veen's "Lifelong Learning in Nederland: Problemen en Oplossingen?". [Lifelong Learning: Problems and Solutions?] In P. Schramade (Ed.), *Handboek Effectief Opleiden* (177–200). (59). Den Haag: Elsevier Bedrijfsinformatie b.v.

## Introduction

The mantra of “lifelong learning from the cradle to the grave,” which we have heard for many years and from all sides, is one that is impressed (if not pressed) upon the public at large (Van Dellen & Heidekamp, 2015). Local and national political authorities, unions, employer organizations, intermediate private institutions, and NGOs seek to encourage (young) adults to learn continuously during their lifespan. Nevertheless, numerous measures within the past two decades have shown – as Hake, Van der Kamp and Slagter (1999) already concluded – that in the Netherlands the outcomes of the national government’s action plans have remained far behind the formulated intentions.

One of the Lisbon objectives (*Memorandum for Lifelong Learning*, 2000) for 2010, to have 12.5% of the Dutch adult population participate in lifelong learning (LLL), was surpassed with participation at 15–16 %; however, in the Dutch plans, a percentage of 20 % was the target. Recent OECD (2012) figures showed clearly that participation in adult education in the Netherlands was decreasing or remaining stable, in contrast to the general OECD figures, which increased. Participation in work-related learning is of particular interest in the Netherlands because Dutch employees invest less time from their working life – in total 0.6 years – in formal and non-formal training and development (*WRR*, 2013) than other European countries (*Education at a Glance*, 2012). In addition, the Dutch investments in formal education that leads to qualification are relatively less (*Education at a Glance*, 2012).

Does Klercq’s statement (2011, p. 1) concerning the Netherlands that “lifelong learning appears to be suffering a slow death” present a true picture? This article challenges that statement. The idea behind this article is that increasing participation in LLL is not a matter of investing euros at the macro level or intermediate (or meso) level of LLL, despite the suggestions of numerous scientists, policymakers, and professionals. Instead, LLL is first about the needs of adults, and second about the actual activities that take place at the micro level. This in essence means that LLL is not a neoliberal issue that can be challenged by a neoliberal framing of supply and delivery rules. LLL is an issue of humanity that starts and ends at the micro level of the individual lives of (young) adults in the context of their communities, and an issue of organizations at the local and national levels. Additionally, LLL activities in the Netherlands are connected with related European and global developments.

In the Netherlands, LLL can primarily be found in three institutional contexts: 1. formal educational institutes, 2. non-formal educational institutes, and 3. private non-formal market-orientated training and development organizations. LLL may also be an aspect of everyday life and work experiences (Illeris, 2007), known as informal learning, which is not included in this article.

What does this article mean by “learning”? In general, at least three approaches or meanings can be differentiated. According to Holmes (2007), the concept of learning can be used to explain what learning is (learning theory), to evaluate whether learning takes place (enough, worthwhile), and ideologically (are the “good” things learned). However, in this article a fourth, broader approach to learning is taken, namely the understanding of lifelong learning as factual and actual foreseen activities that are situated in time and place. The concept of learning as being lifelong applies to learning in the context of the post-initial or continuing education, training, and development of adults.

In everyday practice, LLL covers an enormous variety of activities. Van Dellen and Van der Kamp (2008) tried to develop a workable taxonomy of four exclusive categories of LLL activities.

Van Dellen (2011a) enlarged this taxonomy into six categories:

1. vocational and qualifying education related to the labor market (formal);
2. education with the goal of learning basic skills (second chance education) unrelated to the labor market (formal);
3. education to encourage social cohesion and citizenship (formal);
4. cultural and art schooling and development directed at personal expression and development (mostly non-formal);
5. wide on development targeted educational activities formative on all sorts of aspects of life and for all sorts of target groups (non-formal);
6. function- and organization-directed training and development (non-formal).

The main reason for differentiating among these six categories is to better understand LLL activities in connection with the goals and related contexts in time and place. In this article, LLL activities are described and understood by a number of factors which, according to Brüning (2002, in Von Hippel & Tippelt, 2010, p. 34), are of importance to the behaviour and participation in LLL (see Figure 1).

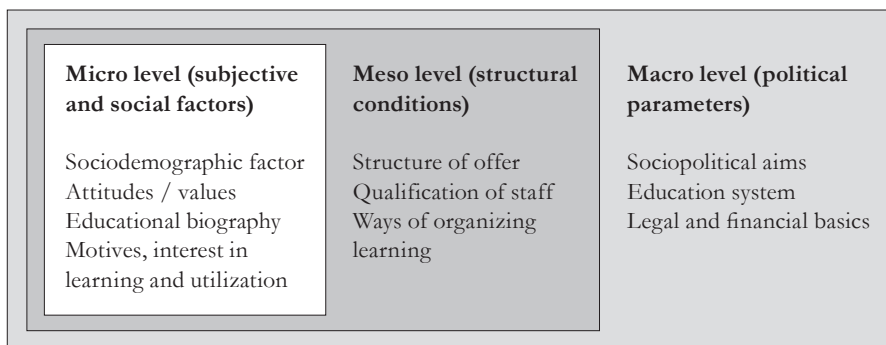


Figure 1.

*Factors influencing LLL (2002, in Von Hippel & Tippelt, 2010, p. 34)*

In this article, the Dutch LLL scene is described with examples evaluating and discussing factors from the micro, meso and macro levels that may influence actual learning activities. The reason for this evaluative and polemic approach is that in the Netherlands, LLL has not fulfilled expectations and new alternative perspectives are emerging. This exercise is of interest for a broader public, beyond the Dutch one, because LLL is an important issue in many European countries and even in countries outside of Europe.

### **The subjective and social factors at the micro level**

Although LLL activities actually occur at the micro level, they are considerably determined contextually. It concerns interventions such as education, schooling, training, and development; for that matter, it also encompasses training and information activities. Interventions may focus on facilitating the teaching of individuals (Figure 1). Teaching an adult – alone or with others – is at its best an independent, developmental, natural process at the micro level that may occur independently from the context. But the reality is different. Adult learning has been initiated on more than one occasion at the intermediate or macro level, and then the quality of adult learning may be absent at the micro level. This is why facilitating LLL activities at the micro level is a difficult process. The problem lies with the coupling of the micro level of learning with the social motivations, intentions, and emotions of the intermediate and macro levels (see Figure 1, right side). For this reason, the relationship of the subjective and social factors at the micro level will be examined in detail with the context (see Figure 1, left side). Following on from Brüning (2002), Von Hippel and Tippelt (2010) named four factors at the micro level that could influence the participation in and the result of LLL activities (Figure 1). The two most important factors at the micro level are *standards and values*, which are expressed in an attitude, and *motives and interests in learning and application*. The other factors are *sociodemographic factors* and *educational biography* (also referred to as *educational history* or *learning biography*). The factors *standards and values* and *motives and interests in learning and application* are of more interest as they are found at the cutting edge of individual(s) and context(s). We present an example of *standards and values*:

An example of standards and values was taken from a recent article in a national morning newspaper. In the article, a Western journalist suggested that education on “sexuality” was desperately needed in Arab countries, as men in these countries often have difficulty, based on the image that they have and get of Western women, controlling their sexuality (read: testosterone) in their interactions with Western women.

The suggestion of this “education” is perhaps well justified from certain perspectives, but the context and the standards and values (attitude) of the Arab men that it concerned was ignored. In terms of, for example, the pedagogics of Paulo Freire, there is a question of whether Arab men could possibly be considered to be in a border situation (in the differences between Western and Arab thinking and action regarding sexually charged situations and behavior). This border situation, whether experienced or not (according to Peter Jarvis: an existential disjunction), can possibly – but never forcedly or enforcedly – lead to the development of awareness on the part of the men concerned. Freire phases this development from magical awareness to initial naive awareness and then critical awareness or self-awareness regarding behavior, in this case in the relationships with Western women. In the eyes of Freire, freedom (in contrast to adaption) is in this way a life objective for every person, and education (pedagogics) emphatically serves this objective. Of course, Arab men are free to possibly naturally develop such awareness.

This example concerns in a sense a cultural clash in standards and values. Arab men see and meet Western women and interpret their behavior in such a way that a Western journalist considers education necessary for these men. But if Freire is right (as in the last sentence of the example), whose freedom does this education serve? According to whose standards and values do the Arab men “receive” this education? Leaving aside whether they want to participate. The second example concerns *motives and interests in learning and application*.

An illustrative example regarding *motives and interests in learning and application* involved a welfare organization for the elderly. This example concerned setting up volunteer initiatives for elderly Moluccans (indigenous inhabitants of the Maluku Islands of Indonesia). These initiatives were more or less driven by a municipality in cooperation with self-governing Moluccan organizations. The joint initiative met with resistance from the Moluccan community. To bridge the language barrier with the first generation of Moluccan elderly, the Moluccan cooperation partners believed it was essential that the welfare organization employee take a language course in Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia). The welfare organization thought this was unnecessary and did not allow the employee concerned to take such a course. The employee decided to pay for and attend such a course on her own time. She thought it would be interesting to learn and she saw a personal need to apply what she learned in the given situation. [derived from a personal talk with Heidekamp, 2010]

In this example, the situation is complex with respect to the motives and interests in learning and application at the micro level, but at this juncture the solution chosen by the employee appears simple. The welfare organization was not prepared to go along with the view of the Moluccan cooperation partners; the employee did so, going against the wishes of her employer. In doing so, because of her motives and interests – whatever they may be – she is freely learning independently and responsibly, but she is paying for it both literally and figuratively.

The essence of these two examples is that the learning processes of adults occur at the micro level, but that the context really determines how these processes – more or less independently of the content – ought to or must be facilitated. In the case of the Arab men, there is in any case the question of whether the envisaged learning processes *can* be facilitated. As far as standards and values and motives and interests in learning and application are concerned, the background to the problems does not truly lie at the micro level. The employee of the welfare organization ignored the decision of her employers and subsequently aligned herself – consciously or unconsciously – at the macro level with the Moluccan cooperation partners. Based on the culturally determined behavior of the Arab men, the Western journalist made a suggestion that entirely ignored the development and attitude of the men at the micro level. Both cases involved a choice being made based on politics and power, which play a role in the implementation of LLL activities. This means that for solutions, an alignment of the interests between levels must be sought. More on this will be given later on in the article.

The two other factors named at the micro level (see Figure 1) are *sociodemographic factors* and *educational biography*. The latter concerns the learning or educational pathway of the adult being educated. These two factors may influence participation in and the results of LLL activities, perhaps negatively. Neither of these factors directly concern the contents or objectives of the LLL activities in particular; they rather concern the personal characteristics and circumstances of the adults participating in the learning process. An illustration follows.

The Netherlands has had Recognition of Competences Acquired (EVC, Erkenning Verworven Competencies) procedures for over ten years. These procedures, which are regarded as LLL activities, are a policy tool established by government authorities, employers, and employees to offer adult individuals the opportunity to register what they have learned in their work and life, with the objective of acquiring recognition for this, usually using a portfolio. An important policy objective is that adults continue to learn and work on their employability

in order to be able to continue to participate in today's knowledge-based society. This is of course a nice objective; however, there appear to be countless problems associated with the practical aspects of such procedures.

This example was presented in a thesis by Burema (2010). An industrial recycling company processes cardboard packaging material for, among other things, fruits and vegetables, and office equipment, such as file binders. The company had to let go fifteen employees. It offered them an EVC procedure. After a briefing and intake interviews, only five employees accepted the procedure, which was carried out by a Regional Training Centre. The reasons that the other ten employees did not participate in the EVC procedure were: they already had a diploma at their own level of functioning, they found another job reasonably quickly, or they had personal reasons for stopping with the EVC procedure after the intake. All three of these reasons actually conflicted with the objective of the EVC. Possessing a diploma at their own level of functioning is an argument that goes directly against LLL principles, as does the reason of "other work." Two thirds of the participants dropped out on personal, subjective grounds, and further participation in the procedure was strongly reduced. The initial introduction to the procedure (briefing and intake) was apparently an insufficient stimulus and motivation for some participants to continue. This insufficiency was also apparent from a subsequent outcome of the procedure: none of the five employees who had participated in the procedure continued with their Personal Development Plan through schooling afterwards. The EVC procedure that had been offered was indeed employed as a policy action and tool, but none of the fifteen potential participants were motivated to commit to lasting development. Apparently, no voluntary and responsible cooperation was achieved. The personal educational history (often less-educated individuals) and sociodemographic factors (older, lower income) played important roles here.

The EVC example illustrates that LLL interventions are employed based on a perspective of collective action rather than a perspective of personal result. This supply-orientated characteristic of LLL interventions is generally the pitfall, but it can be avoided to some degree. The policy of government authorities and organizations focuses, short term, on collective action; however, this policy offers little guarantee of personal long-term – let alone lifelong – learning results. Where is the essence of this problem demonstrated in the EVC procedure example? The parties involved in the procedure did not reach the employees. On the one hand, the focus on the supply side



in EVC procedures is to blame for this. On the other hand, the EVC professionals apparently had insufficient aptitude or drive to engage with the staff (the actual clients) with openness and sincerity. The influence and meaning of the intermediate level of LLL activities is thus immediately clear.

### **Structural circumstances at the intermediate level**

LLL interventions actually occur at the micro level, but these interventions have a strong relationship with the context as far as participation and results are concerned (Von Hippel & Tippelt, 2010). At the intermediate level, it concerns, in this regard, the organizational and professional characteristics of the interventions. Moreover, one must consider such factors as the structural side of the education on offer, the professionalism of those who facilitate the learning, and the ways in which the learning is given shape or organized (see Figure 1).

The structural aspect of the education on offer was discussed as a problem in the EVC example. This problem is again discussed in the next example, with a detailed quote from Heesakkers (2011, p. 20) from the appendix of the very latest annual report by the Foundation for Higher Education in the Third Age (VHS, *Stichting voor Volkshogeschoolwerk*) in the Netherlands.

Under the heading *VHS ideals still leading*, Heesakkers wrote: “The ideals of the VHS, expressed in the key concepts of emancipation, participation, and ongoing democratization, have remained important issues throughout my entire career, and thus also in my current practice. These concepts are also referred to with terms such as self-determination, development opportunities, taking part, and avoiding exclusion. [...] Of course, the conditions under which we work today are essentially different than those during the period of government grants. Terms like market-orientated and client-orientated, commercialism, cost-effectiveness, profitability, and outstanding quality point to these changed circumstances. Still, the questions remain: Who are you? What is your purpose? What is your aim? What added value will you attain? and What distinguishes you from others? With the updated mission statement of our new educational organization, we provide an answer.” The embedded box quotes the beginning and end of the mission statement.

*Mission*

*We want to actively contribute  
to development and connect  
people and organizations who  
dare to live and learn.*

.....

.....

*In this way, we shape and enrich  
ourselves and others.*

*Learning and living in a sustainable world.  
That's what we stand for.*

Heesakkers concluded: “With this approach, we distinguish our position within the world of education and consultancy companies. It is an approach which harkens back to the reasons for founding the first VHS in the Netherlands.”

Heesakkers said that times had changed, but at the same time the new educational organization group maintains ideals that actually look for solutions to social problems, such as exclusion (lack of participation of target groups), democratization, and emancipation. This makes it implicitly clear that in a structural sense the education offered by the VHS in the Netherlands is not or is no longer echoed by both government bodies (macro level) and parties who should open up to learning processes (micro level). The VHS appears to have suffered as a result of its own ideology, namely the sociodemocratic political approach to earmarked target groups. This approach is no longer echoed. The questions that Heesakkers incidentally asks, which resulted in the updated mission statement, give an almost religious pastoral tinge to the future of the new educational organizational group and the associated organizations. The question remains of whether this offers a perspective for overcoming the social problems of our time and whether the distinguished position of the new organization within the world of LLL can be sufficiently guaranteed. With that, the second factor at the intermediate level, professionalism, also comes into the picture.

The professionalism of those facilitating adult learning was the subject of Van Dellen, (2011b). That study determined that, on the basis of international exploratory and opinion-forming research in Europe, professionalism must be based on three competence domains, namely: 1. content and didactics, 2. facilitating adult learning, and 3. personal development and the development of the professional identity.

In itself, the domain of content and didactics appears to be the most clear-cut, with the intended content associated with an objective and the appropriate

didactics for what is on offer at its core. However, determining the content coupled to an objective for teaching adults can be problematic, despite all the design methods and theories that might be applied. The determination of content and objectives for adults is essentially different from that for children. Needs assessment is usually given as a possible approach and solution. However, “needs” is a polymorphous concept that cannot be easily and objectively (i.e. validly and reliably) measured for the adult(s) or the context concerned. The number of available soft and hard needs assessment methods is large. These methods can be divided into two sets: 1. the determination of objective needs versus subjective needs, and 2. the use of chiefly quantitative versus qualitative assessment tools (see also Van der Veen, 1982). An example of such an assessment method within the field of training and developing staff was mentioned in the context of one organization’s human resource development.

For a number of years, health and safety have been high on the agenda of many companies. This was certainly true for an energy network manager responsible for establishing, maintaining, managing, and developing energy transport and distribution networks in a number of Dutch regions. The “Health, Safety, and Environment” manager of a company ascertained that staff sometimes perform work in ways other than those prescribed, resulting in continuing incidents and accidents. The underlying observation was that despite an extensive range of technical and procedure-orientated safety training, the “unsafe” behavior of the staff did not disappear. This raised the question: How can the desired safety-conscious behavior of the staff be influenced with the objective of reducing accidents? (Van Vilsteren, 2010). This question led to a qualitative investigation into what change was necessary to make a “safety culture” possible. The investigation involved document analysis of objectives, visions, and strategies in this field, observations of safety-consciousness training and behavior in the workplace, and in-depth interviews, mainly with managers on their safety experiences and their role in this regard. Five pre-determined theory-based needs indicators (and sub-indicators at a lower level) that could influence behavioral changes were covered: *procedures*, *training*, *addressable behavior*, *example behavior*, and *encouragement or coaching*. The results of this needs assessment were multifarious, unsurprising, and also disappointing; bluntly speaking, there was a “need” for almost everything that could be proposed and named, in light of all the indicators and sub-indicators, to attain safety awareness and behavioral change and achieve the desired culture (see also Van Vilsteren, 2010). For example, there was a need for more attractive (and fewer) *procedures*,

where use would be made of audio-visual material, especially personal stories from colleagues. As far as the *training* was concerned, there was a need for more e-learning or blended learning (including face-to-face contact) that preferably pertained to practical situations. Besides good *example behavior*, particularly from supervisors, there was a need for *addressable behavior*; staff must dare to address each other, and other stakeholders such as contractors, about unsafe behavior. More incentives and *coaching* were needed within and between all of the layers of the organization to promote a safety culture.

With *Training Needs Assessment*, Rosset (1987) attempted to integrate the different methods of needs assessment by choosing five aspects simultaneously as the objective of such an assessment. This assessment involves collecting as much information as possible on: 1. optimum behavior or optimum knowledge; 2. present (current) behavior or present (current) knowledge; 3. the feelings of the parties involved; 4. the causes of the problem from various perspectives; and 5. solutions to the problem from numerous perspectives. In this way, Rosset favored neither objective or subjective nor quantitative or qualitative, but instead linked the different approaches. This difficult process side of the first skills domain is often badly underestimated and under-illuminated with regard to the professionalism of a trainer or educator of adults.

The second domain of the professionalism of teachers, trainers, etc. is facilitating adult learning. This concerns skills such as stimulating and motivating learners, supporting learning processes, offering care to those who learn, and controlling (managing) group processes (Van Dellen, 2011b). The following is an example of facilitating adult learning.

In her book *To Train at Master Level: Effective Trainers as Role Models*, Dekkers (2006) provided a personal answer to the question of how trainers facilitate adult learning. She concluded, based on her modelling of successful trainers, that to a large extent experienced trainers use their personality to train others. Nevertheless, there are patterns (or are they skills?) to be recognized in the training given by experienced and successful trainers. Examples of patterns are leading and following, observing, providing insight, and intervening. An extremely important condition for the creation or existence of these behavior patterns or skills for the trainer is making a connection to the teaching content, and connecting with the motivations, themes, and desires of the trainees. Without this connection, trainers cannot work well, according to Dekkers (see also Van Dellen & Wagena, 2008).

As Dekkers showed (2006), facilitating adult learning is a personal skill that allows the trainer to adjust in almost all respects to the person learning (see also Bron & Jarvis, 2008). Of course, this adjustment is limited by the trainee's need to learn or change. This need very often cannot be easily and immediately specified or described with regard to what must be taught. Adults may be prone to organic and/or biographical or autobiographical learning barriers (Illeris, 2007, p. 157) or may have developed a frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5) which prevents intended learning from occurring. Illeris (2007) distinguished three categories of learning barriers. All three of these categories can be reduced to the needs of those that do not learn as intended. The first category concerns *incorrect learning* (Illeris, 2007, p. 158). This category is associated with incomprehension, misunderstanding, or a lack of concentration as regards the intended learning content. Incorrect learning occurs on a large scale (Illeris, 2007, p. 174). This barrier can be professionally overcome relatively easily with better and clearer communication, by consulting with learners, and by creating greater clarity as regards the initial qualifications of future learners. The second learning barrier, the *defensive reaction to learning*, concerns not so much the learning content, but rather the unconscious emotional reaction to compulsory or repeated learning. Such a reaction to learning can have an individual or a collective origin (an example of a collective origin is the overwhelming threats of the risk society; Beck, 1992). It is beyond the goal of this article to go into all the defensive reactions to learning, such as regression, projection, and ambivalence. However, Illeris emphatically made clear the importance of this mechanism: "In general, defence is probably the psychological mechanism that most contributes to learning not taking place or becoming different, and as a rule, a high degree of security, permissiveness and motivation is required to get over this defence, for to a certain extent it is needed for the maintenance of self-worth and identity. But at the same time, overcoming defence is often the most decisive factor for achieving a progressive learning, both academic and personal" (Illeris, 2007, p. 161). The third and last learning barrier, according to Illeris, is *resistance to learning*. It is substantially different from a defensive reaction to learning. Resistance to learning is more a cognitive choice, when a person or a group experiences a conflict due to an undesired school lesson, training, or course, a specific subject, a particular teacher, trainer, or coach, or a social situation in a group.

Due to these learning barriers, the professional competence requirement of content and didactics must be supplemented with the competence requirement of the ability to facilitate learning. This competence is needed to regulate the emotions, cognition, and attention of learners and future learners (see Figure 2). Apparently, this competence is connected to the personality of the professional as Dekkers (2006) indicated and Van Dellen and De Jong (2010) also showed.

The third domain of the LLL professional is that of personal development and development of professional identity. In the Netherlands, this domain is more or less a consequence of the Dutch Professions in Education Act (Wet op de Beroepen in het Onderwijs, 2005) in which being “competent in reflection and development” is one of seven competence fields. In their report *Competence Requirements in Teacher Training: Frame of Reference for Curriculum and Examination*, the Dutch National Platform for Professions in Education (*Landelijke Platform Beroepen in Onderwijs*, 2010) showed that the seven competences of the Dutch Professions in Education Act, such as interpersonally competent, pedagogically competent, and competent in cooperating with colleagues, have a relatively fixed status and function as tools for curricula and examination in the training of future teachers. However, the comprehensive profession-orientated training programs for teachers and instructors are not explicitly directed at adult learning and teaching anywhere in the Netherlands. The expertise of teachers in formal educational institutions and professionals in non-formal education continues to create problems, because they are regularly not qualified, they often work part-time, and their perspectives and legal security are relative, considering the sociopolitical circumstances (at the macro level) in Dutch adult education. This makes the competence domain of personal development and development of professional identity (Bron & Jarvis, 2008) even more important for the development of the professionalism of teachers, educators, etc. in adult education, as well as for those who are charged with training and development in and around employment organizations. As far as the trainers, coaches, and other supervisors of learning processes in and associated with employment organizations, there are all kinds of certifying vocational training programs for trainers, coaches, etc., even training leading to a master’s degree (for example, in Neuro-Linguistic Programming or Transactional Analysis), but there is no official bachelor’s or master’s degree in adult learning and development. This shortcoming is exactly why such a development originating from this wide group of professionals (teachers, educators, trainers, coaches, counsellors, and supervisors of adult learning), to ultimately ensure a more permanent professional identity (think of the third competence requirement) is called for. Such a clearly defined identity could also give the professional group higher status (Bron & Jarvis, 2008). A new formal competence must be developed and accredited at bachelor’s and master’s level for this professional group.

Finally, at the intermediate level, the third factor in LLL: the ways in which the learning is structured or organized. The structuring of the education offered in the Netherlands, of the formal and non-formal adult education, and training and teaching in employment organizations, compared with that in the United States, shows that in a general sense the Dutch situation

does everything but serve the adult learners. The structure results in limited accessibility and participation based on enforced rather than voluntary participation. This may have everything to do with the climate of education instead of learning that dominates the Dutch LLL. At the end of this article this issue will be discussed further.

### Political parameters at the macro level

The political parameters at the macro level are, to a certain degree, of conditional importance for the other levels, but they also play a somewhat ambivalent role in the various work fields of LLL and with regard to the associated primary objectives. Table 1 serves to illustrate this.

Table 1.

*The three work fields of LLL and influencing factors at the macro level*

Work fields	Sociopolitical objectives	System	Legal and financial
Formal education	Yes	Formal education	Legally established, regulated, and financed
Non-formal education	Yes, indirect	Non-formal providers	NGOs, associations, and foundations
Training and development in and around employment organizations	No, sometimes as a result of social developments or government policy	Non-formal bureaus for training, education, and development, and individuals (freelancers)	Commercial or private institutions or people

Source: (Van Dellen, 2011a)

Formal education has little freedom in terms of the education on offer in light of the sociopolitical objectives that government bodies stipulate; formal education includes vocationally orientated education and general education, education aimed at fundamental skills (Dutch language, social skills), and activities aimed at citizenship and social cohesion. The needs of the adult learners are often subordinate to these aims, and their needs are only ever addressed thanks to the professionalism of the teacher or educator. The education system and the legal and financial basis of formal education are to blame for this.



Non-formal education involves independent organizations in civil society with sociopolitical objectives that originally (between World War I and II and after WWII) fell into the category of social work or part-time non-formal education. Examples of such Dutch organizations are *Volksuniversiteiten* [literally, Folk Universities], *Humanistisch Verbond* [Humanistic Association], *Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen* [Society for the General Good], and Senior Web. Regional and local authorities regularly recruit such organizations for specific purposes and target groups. This field includes a reasonably widespread system of non-formal institutes, which mainly focus on art and culture or aspects of citizenship or personal development in all kinds of subjects; the Folk Universities offer a wide range of courses. This *popular education*, as it is called in Scandinavian countries, is experiencing significant difficulties in the Netherlands, partly because of political opposition, partly because of the education on offer, which is perhaps also ideologically tinted, and partly due to a shrinking market and a form of collective exclusion. Despite the low threshold in this work field, it has not been a successful stepping stone to other work fields. Perhaps its relative informality contributes somewhat to this. Research has shown that, for example, the palette of non-formal education in the Netherlands is multi-colored, “with a diversity of providers of education and inquiring parties at the national and regional or local level. This means that nobody really feels responsible for the non-formal education, such that opportunities are missed” (Doets, Van Esch, Houtepen, Visser, & De Sousa, 2008, p. 99).

The third work field includes all possible activities surrounding work and learning where employers often fulfil an important role as the commissioning party, customer, or the party that pays and decides. The objectives of this work field also sometimes have a sociopolitical perspective (e.g. diversity in organizations), but are particularly inspired by developing employment organizations, or by ones that want to develop, and because of this deem it necessary for their employees to learn and develop sustainable skills. Employees sometimes take the initiative themselves based on a desire to maintain employability. The dominant systems of this last LLL work field are departments within the employment organizations themselves, private external training institutes, and sometimes also regular teaching institutes (such as, with regard to EVC and language teaching, employees in companies). The latter activities are then performed in the formal teaching institutes as contract activities.

The ambivalent role of the macro level within the various work fields of LLL, and as far as the key objectives are concerned, lies in the social background of the political parameters. Authorities for formal education, the management of non-formal education institutes, and employers or owners in private commercial organizations determine the objectives, social and



otherwise, of LLL that they deem necessary, using policy and funding or investment based on social developments or job market developments. On the one hand, this reduces the involved professionals to simply passing on knowledge or skills. On the other hand, those learning based on their needs are not where the learning within LLL stems from. This assertion might appear to be trivial or self-evident in the sense of “that’s the way things are and that’s the way they’ve always been”: the individual is subordinate to the system, moldable and adaptable (in the end). Nothing could be further from the truth. Dutch policy that is directed at dominant target groups within LLL is a good example of this; of course, there are successes to be mentioned in this regard as well, but this would appear to be proselytizing and preaching to the converted (see the VHS example above).

### **Unresolved issues to reconsider**

Several incidents and problems surrounding the Dutch LLL scene have been outlined here in examples of LLL activities or developments. The examples serve to provide insight, in a practical and concrete way, into the characteristic issues of LLL in the Netherlands. In this section, the examples are first summarized using more abstract wording (with, where possible, the level at which the problem originates given in brackets). In addition, a number of further findings from the literature have been included. The most important causes of the failure of the Dutch LLL scene to fulfill expectations are listed, and visionary perspectives for the near and far future formulated in the next section.

In summary, the examples from this article and elsewhere in the literature show the following unresolved issues:

- The often relatively weak “subordinate” position of learners and future learners in LLL; this is abetted rather than hindered [from the micro to macro level] by the strongly prevailing target group policy (the elderly, the less educated, and immigrants).
- Nevertheless, in Europe, due to the strongest parties (authorities and institutions) getting and having their way, LLL participation is reasonably above average in the Netherlands (although lower than in Northern European countries); however, employed and unemployed people often participate because they are obliged or feel obliged to do so. According to the professional theory of LLL, this can at the very least be called paradoxical.
- The range of education offered (content) is too strictly controlled by the various authorities, the LLL institutes, and the companies where management usually decides or believes that the employees need training and development [intermediate and macro level].

- The global risk society asks too much (Beck, 1992) in the field of learning and the development of citizens and employed people, which can result in resistance to learning (see also Illeris, 2007) [micro level].
- There is limited professionalism, or perhaps even a lack of professionalism, among those who facilitate the adult education [intermediate level].
- The motivation of adults to learn can be seen “as a power and control tool between the various levels” (Ahl, 2006, p. 400); this incidentally also applies to not motivating or even demotivating adults [elaboration at the micro level].
- Ideological control (empowerment, emancipation, and inclusion) is an aspect of the problem of managing the education offered [intermediate level: part of the non-formal education].
- There is an abundance of relatively imperfect theories and sub-theories on teaching adults and a lack of clarification regarding the “motivation and emotion” aspect therein.
- There is a complete absence in the LLL debate of learners and future learners, despite their recognized maturity.
- There is a shortage of flexibility and made-to-measure options in vocational and higher education<sup>2</sup>.

The striking thing about these issues is that they all appear reasonably plausible – sometimes even trivial – but they apparently cannot be avoided, despite the relatively long history of (around fifty years) and experience with LLL. The core of these issues, most of which are generally recognized, and the attendant unfulfilled expectations, lies with the various conflicting interests, convictions, and opinions of the actors at the micro, intermediate, and macro levels and with the apparently often unrealized quality of content, form, and intended results of the LLL activities. In addition, a very important factor is that both civil society and the decision makers in authorities, private companies, and public education institutes evidently appear to be convinced that one half of the population must look after the other half. This even applies in the highly-developed Netherlands. This conviction means that LLL can be considered to be a strictly regulated sector in the Netherlands, in which learners (adults) never take center stage. Within the LLL activities in the Netherlands, the human element has been more or less eliminated by the regulations. In the United States of America, the formulated conviction

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<sup>2</sup> I gratefully thank Dr. Ruud van der Veen, Professor of Adult Education and Leadership at Teachers College, the School of Education of Columbia University, New York, for his comments on and contributions to this article.

is much less widespread and moreover almost entirely non-existent in government. In addition, the conviction that caring for one another is necessary may be prevalent in the Northern European countries, but according to the Director of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning of, Arne Carlsen (personal conversation, 10-12 October, 2010), in these Scandinavian countries, and in particular in Denmark, popular non-formal education and other forms of adult education, such as training and teaching, form an emphatic part of the historical cultural heritage.

As far the three levels and their relationship(s) are concerned, something special is going on. Authors such as Von Hippel and Tippelt (2010, p. 43) have asserted that: "Only in combination with one another can the three levels (society, politics, and employers; further education; and individuals) lead to an increase in further education." Yet based on interviews with the parties involved in the three levels, the same authors reported that in particular the deployment and maintenance of funding and in addition both the proximity of the education on offer and the strengthening of the social climate can facilitate a strong or stronger relationship or connection between the levels. They concluded, in agreement with Meisel (2003, p. 107), that the acceptance of funding leads to a dangerous "individualization of problems that have not been solved on the educational-political or institutional level (e.g. reaching the 'disadvantaged')." Since the advice of the Dutch Educational Council (*Werk maken van een leven lang leren*, 2003), *Working on lifelong learning*, in the Netherlands too (following international example), the idea dominates that LLL is, in particular, an issue of funding (and in an extension thereof certification). At the same time, the Council (*Werk maken van een leven lang leren*, 2003, p. 11) stated: "The Educational Council deems stimulation of demand for learning at least as important as strengthening the education offered; it also then places the focus on the material to be learned in the promotion of LLL." However, in the following years, it appeared that LLL did not really acquire a lasting impulse in the Netherlands (for example, the participation figures did not increase significantly). In spite of this, it appears that the Educational Council in 2009 did not return to this earlier standpoint as far as secondary and higher education for adults is concerned. However, the Council did consider the specification of four central functions of LLL necessary: 1. reparation, if adults did not have the opportunity for whatever reason to attain a desired level of education at a young age; 2. change of career, if people discover later in life that they have other talents and therefore want to change career; 3. keeping up with the times and progress in society, to maintain one's position in the job market; 4. sociocultural and personal function, not immediately leading to economic benefit but "the Council believes that stimulating learning is good in a general sense" (*Middelbaar en hoger onderwijs voor volwassenen*, 2009, p. 18).

The unusual thing about these four central functions is that, on the one hand, they are obvious, but, on the other hand, they are not derived from learners' demands (to increase participation and quality of LLL). The Dutch Educational Council (*Middelbaar en hoger onderwijs voor volwassenen*, 2009, p. 21) itself, at the same time, recognizes that there is a need for research into questions such as: "Who are the participants in adult education and what are their motives? The extent of the demand for adult education is also unknown. It then concerns people who would like to participate in education, but who don't do so: why not?"

As indicated in one of the examples, learning in freedom (Paolo Freire) actually forms the core of all LLL activities. Funding, accessible education, and the right social climate are desirable, perhaps even necessary conditions, but certainly not the triggers to manage and regulate participation in and quality of LLL. In fact, avoidance of LLL may even be the outcome if another interpretation of the combination of the three levels is not sought.

### **The issues redefined in two perspectives**

The first perspective is "LLL for everyone!" The idea formulated above, that within the LLL activities in the Netherlands, the human element has been more or less eliminated by regulations, deserves some further explanation. LLL is pre-eminently a human activity. Jarvis (2005, p. 7) described LLL as: "the combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – *body* (genetic, physical and biological) and *mind* (knowledge, skills, attitude, values, emotions, beliefs and senses) *experiences* social situations, the *perceived content* which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual *person's biography* resulting in a continually *changing (or more experienced) person*." Such a definition reverberates particularly in the fragmented non-formal educational institutions, but clearly less in the formal educational institutions, and perhaps only to a small degree in the non-formal private organizations that offer training and development.

Since 2000, the EU Commission holds a vision of LLL that strongly deviates from the definition of Jarvis: "The mission is to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustained economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. LLL is the core element of the strategy, central not only to competitiveness and employability but also to social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development" (*Memorandum for Lifelong Learning*, 2000). Of course, this formulation gives a particularly strong impulse to government authorities, private organizations, etc., and a less strong one to

formal education regulated by government authorities; there is no impulse in the direction of non-formal education. The contrast between the definitions of Jarvis and the EU and the dominance of the latter have certainly not done LLL any good in the Netherlands. The contradiction between neoliberal and social opinions on the content and design of LLL in the Netherlands has perhaps killed off the wide range of LLL at the expense of learners, whether voluntary, compulsory, or otherwise.

Based on interview findings, Von Hippel and Tippelt (2010) presented the socially interpreted conviction that adult education (with a purpose) can in a conditional sense best be managed and regulated with money, through accessible education and a good social climate. This conviction is more wishful thinking and misleading than fruitful, certainly in light of the issues summarized above. LLL for everyone does not start with funding at the macro level and then subsequently sweep down to the adult learners in a veritable funding cascade. Adult learners are almost by definition repeatedly inundated with questions and overwhelmed, as no careful connection is laid with their environment and their basic needs. At the same time, they have more or less disappeared as the party requesting learning, and hardly take center stage in the process.

The second perspective is: “LLL is an open-society model!” In an open, liberal-humanistic, and dynamic society like the Netherlands, everyone has relatively equal access to education for work and citizenship. In such a society, interested and responsible adults (citizens and employed people) must take center stage in LLL. They desire to and would do well to invest in their development (at a later stage perhaps, e.g. after completion, rewarded by the government). To that end, certified and therefore well-educated professionals (within public and private institutes and NGOs) must not only offer demand-based substantive quality, but also see to a good didactic approach and proper facilitation. At the macro level, government authorities and administrative middle management must withdraw to prevent further bureaucratization and to combat obstructive interdependence between levels. The work field over its entire breadth belongs, in particular, to learners and to the professionals who want to and can facilitate this from whatever position, formal or non-formal. It is very much a question whether the government authorities are/must be responsible for the four functions of LLL formulated by the Educational Council (*Middelbaar en hoger onderwijs voor volwassenen*, 2009). How they must interpret this responsibility is also questionable. As things now stand, the interpretation has not been very successful; funding mainly ends up with intermediary institutions and to a relatively small degree with prospective learners. A smartcard for LLL – as is used in the United Kingdom – does not appear to be such a bad idea for the Netherlands, considering the open society.

The end of LLL as a concept and practice has been predicted more than once. Perhaps this concept has seen its best times. However, the practices surrounding adults learning and changing will not die out. These practices and the associated LLL activities have their origins in the logical transformation as a result of globalization (Kristensson Uggla, 2008). LLL in the past, present, and future was and is the result of permanent change in the world; this permanent change requires the postmodern adult to not just be “a person” but “an adaptive person” (Chiapello & Boltanski, 2005; according to Kristensson Uggla, 2008, p. 222) as well. Adults must be increasingly flexible and adaptive, whether as employees or citizens. This means that adults of any age permanently live in a kind of quandary: this quandary concerns the contradiction between “I” and “the other(s) in me.” Do I hold on to my authenticity or do I adapt that which I am self-consciously through proactive reflection on the context (society)? The philosopher Ricoeur (1995) emphasized in *Oneself as Another* that this personal mediation is necessary “to make a detour through sameness (*idem*) and otherness in order to determine ‘oneself as another’” (according to Kristensson Uggla, 2008, p. 223). In the future, the primary task of LLL in the Netherlands will be this constant personal mediation (renewal) facilitation (see also the definition of Jarvis, above). This means, in particular, that LLL limits itself to and acquires the character of transformational learning (Mezirow, 1997). It concerns LLL for people who want to and can participate in learning to change themselves and participate in an open society. The other more classical types of learning, such as accumulation, assimilation, and accommodation, will still form a part of LLL, but they are different. The question about the future of LLL does not so much concern what adults learn, but, according to Sloterdijk (2011), in a general sense it increasingly concerns adults changing their lives. According to Sloterdijk, this means three things: train, train, and train. Everyone must train throughout their lives. They must train in order to continue participating in every aspect. And “what to learn” chiefly concerns personal mediation, rather than knowledge, although it does concern which knowledge someone wants to use and how. The professionalism of the parties who facilitate adult education stands or falls with the competence to shape and define this training for quality of life, work, and leisure.

### **In conclusion**

Klercq’s statement (2011, p. 1) that “lifelong learning appears to be suffering a slow death” will prove incorrect. Innovation is the key to all progress and that also applies to vision and policy regarding LLL. Some years ago, the Dutch government took a step backwards with, for example, the disbanding

of the “Learning and Working” project team. Furthermore, as far as LLL is concerned, for ages the government has largely focused on vocational education. An outline agreement was concluded between the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the Dutch Council for Training and Education [*Nederlandse Raad voor Training en Opleiding*], but this lacked a shift in perspective with respect to the adults that it concerns. It again mainly concerned the (improved) range of education on offer (tailoring) and qualification, certification, and expediency; everything to keep the government happy. When and where will we let the adult learners speak up without immediately relapsing into pandering to frivolous target group desires? Maybe this is what two Dutch ministers (Bussemaker & Asscher, 2014) recently meant with their call for a stronger learning climate which asks for employers and employees who are motivated to be flexible and to learn and to invest accordingly in themselves to keep their knowledge and skills on track (Bussemaker & Asscher, 2014)? Unfortunately, the measures they added to this call were mostly directed at financing activities at the intermediate level, although vouchers for adult learners were part of it. It seems clear that LLL will not suffer a slow death for the time being, but it also seems that rather little has been learned from the past.

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